

Courier of Fortune

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CHAPTER XXVI. At the City Gates.

Gerard's judgment that the unexpected position at Mallincoort would be found much too formidable to be dismissed with a curse and a threat was quite correct.

The governor was furiously angry, and as sternly resolved as ever to carry his purpose through; nothing should be suffered to come between him and it; but the last few hours had revealed certain obstacles to the importance of which even his selfish rage could not blind him.

He had had convincing proof that in threatening Gabrielle he would provoke far greater and more dangerous antagonism than any he had yet encountered at any time of his government.

The first sign of this had come from the duchess herself. She had sent for him soon after Lucette had left the castle, and after avowing her share in procuring Gerard's escape, had met his storm of invective with a stubborn resistance culminating in a solemn declaration that if harm was done to the hair of Gabrielle's head, she would have herself carried in her bed into streets of Morvaix and denounce him and his acts to the citizens, and if that did not avail she would take the matter, if it cost her her life, to the King of France himself.

He had laughed at her threats, but they had gone home, none the less, and had rendered him ill at ease.

More was to come, however. Babbion was right in saying the city was roused by the news that Gabrielle was a fugitive from the castle troops. She was beloved in Morvaix by people of every class, rich and poor alike, and hundreds of them were ready to spend their lives in her defense.

The governor's agents in the city had brought him word of this, and the citizens themselves had been to the castle to assure him of their safety from the governor. Hot words had passed on both sides, but the governor had found it discreet to appease them by giving the assurances of his safety and explaining that the object of the pursuit was merely a prisoner, a murderer, who had escaped from the castle.

Hints had been given him, too, discreetly and almost timorously, by some of his officials, that the concern on Gabrielle's account was not confined to the city, but had spread to such of the troops as were Morvaix men, and that reliance upon them in any attack upon her could not be fully placed.

Considerations of this disquieting character could not but produce an effect even upon the iron of his will, but he still saw a way to gain his end without open conflict with the forces supporting the Mallincoort influence. He decided to capture Gabrielle through her lover. If Gerard could be captured he would have once more the means of secretly compelling the consent of the Mallincoort troops to force from her by open violence. She would consent to be his wife to save Gerard.

And here it was that he found the position at Mallincoort so disconcerting. He did not doubt that Gabrielle was in the Mallincoort house, and he had gone there anticipating no more opposition to his entry than the presence of a large body of troops could at once remove. But instead of that, he found the Mallincoort house surrounded and held by a force which his soldiers' eyes showed him was both powerful and ably disposed for purposes of defense.

That he could carry the place with the resources at his command was not, of course, open to question; although there would be a severe conflict involving bloodshed and the loss of many lives on both sides. It was not this which made him hesitate. But to batter the Mallincoort house with his cannon, and to subject her to imminent personal danger and to rouse the Mallincoort supporters in the city to active interference.

There was another course open, however; to starve those in Mallincoort to surrender. The Mallincoort house was a large one, and impetuous, overbearing will, but it was less dangerous and in the end would be equally successful. He decided to adopt it, and at the same time to keep up a sufficient show of force to intimidate those in Mallincoort. He could easily surround the house with a force of his own troops, and an occasional feint could carry those defending it and thus hasten their submission.

First, however, he would make sure that Gabrielle was really in Mallincoort, and at the end of the hour of grace he had allowed her to leave the castle, he would give his mission to be made, and when as before Pascal appeared in answer to it, he demanded Gabrielle.

She came out with Gerard at her side, and very proud and defiant she looked. "I wish you to understand the nature of the resistance," she said, "I am a woman, mademoiselle, and the consequences," began the governor.

"I understand it perfectly, my lord," she answered. "You are harboring at Mallincoort a prisoner of mine, and this neither the laws of France nor I myself will tolerate. There is no one in Mallincoort, my lord, who can rightly be termed your prisoner. Whom do you mean?"

"The man who was with you at your side, at whose escape from my prison you connived," he said.

"I mean the Lord Gerard de Bourbon. It is by his commands that the doors of Mallincoort are closed against you. And they will remain closed, my lord."

"If you as governor of Morvaix think you have a right to use violence against the son of your sovereign, the Duke de Bourbon, you must act as you will."

"I demand that man be given up to me," he said.

"The blood of the Bourbon soldiers here will be shed freely in defense of their master, and for the rest the responsibility is yours, my lord. I will spare it. Slight as the thing was, it has made grievous inroads on our supply."

"We need not be anxious. We will last out till morning, and then we shall go. They are likely to try and harry us through the night, so that we must be on our guard, but the real attack will be delivered in daylight, and before it comes we must be out of the house. We have gained our end, the delay of a night, and for tomorrow we can safely trust ourselves to the burghers."

"My plan is this," explained Gerard. "We will hold the Mallincoort house through the night—unless I am wrong and we are to be driven from it by force—and in the morning we will slip away secretly. Lucette and you accompanying us, and make first for the gates to leave the city with the pass we took from the spy, and if we fail we shall place ourselves in the hands of the burghers."

"And the men here?"

"Must remain until the last possible moment as a ruse to keep the city in command, and every show of continued resistance must be maintained. The governor knows we are here and thinks he has us safely caged. In that belief the city will probably be relaxed; the search parties will be recalled from the city, and a bold front and a slight disguise will be all necessary."

"He knew nothing, and I could ask no more than a general question, or I might have stirred suspicion. Now, Madame Burgher," he said to Lucette, "and there was some laughing between them over setting her in the pillbox. But Gerard was in no mood to see any objects for jesting, and Lucette declared it was a good thing, indeed no more of her features could be seen."

"Now for a bold face on things and a laugh if you can, Lucette," cried Pascal, "and we'll soon see whether an honest burgher and his wife cannot ride abroad together in this uncomfortable fashion on a fine July morning."

They rode slowly toward the city gate, Gerard and Gabrielle following some distance behind. Pascal laughed and gestured over his shoulder to Lucette, until coming in sight of the gate he said excitedly: "God be thanked, it's open, Lucette. We shan't be husband and wife much longer, if all goes well."

"A thought which seems to give you consummate relief," she answered.

"I have said nothing yet, but I am not quite easy about that officer, Lucette. He was so curious about the castle, and do you think he can have recognized you? Does he know you well?"

"Is it M. Burgher questioning now?" she asked, with a smile.

"No. We've dropped that, and we're waiting to see what next. Just now it's some other good fellow in earshot."

"Yes, he used to know me very well. 'Is he another of them?' He could not resist the jest, and she laughed back with a toss of the head."

"I don't of course understand that. I won't, I mean."

"Do you think he can have sent any one after you to make sure you were Madame Burgher?"

"Do you think so?" She was serious now.

"How did you get rid of the horses?"

"M. Gerard did that."

"I must speak to him then. A very little slip, and he would be in a bad way. He called Gerard aside and told him his doubts. 'I took the horses back to where you hired them. I dared not leave them standing here. I passed a couple of soldiers, but they took no notice of me; and of course I made sure that no one followed me here.' It was not, however, that he was so careful, but that he was so sure of himself. 'Is he another of them?' He could not resist the jest, and she laughed back with a toss of the head."

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